

Archived Information

Interim Evaluation of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory

I. Brief Overview of Laboratory

The McREL Interim Evaluation was conducted at the Laboratory headquarters in Aurora, Colorado from May 3-7, 1999. I served as one member of a five-person peer review panel. In preparation for the evaluation on-site, I reviewed all materials assigned to the team prior to arrival in Colorado. During the visit, in addition to listed agenda items, I had the opportunity to visit the Resource Library and to discuss, briefly, in-house staff development at McREL.

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), one of the original Regional Educational Laboratories, has served a seven state central region since 1966. States served are Colorado, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming. The region has 20% of the nation's land mass and 6% of its population. Major cities in the region include: Denver, CO; Kansas City, MO; Kansas City, KS; Omaha, NE; and, St. Louis, MO.

Over the past 33 years, the Lab has had four Executive Directors. For eight years McREL has been housed in leased space in Aurora, Colorado, a suburb of Denver. McREL presently employs a staff of 85. OERI REL monies, \$11,545,727, accounted for 43.1% of the Lab's total funds during fiscal years 1996, 1997, 1998. Additional sources of funds during this contract period include \$4,456,437 from other direct federal awards, and \$10,803,297 from other sources: pass through and other contracts; royalties and publications; interest and investments.

Opportunities to serve the region include mandates by the seven states for school districts to align curriculum and instruction with a state's standards or student assessment measures.

McREL's Specialty Area for this contract period is Curriculum, Learning and Instruction. Prior to the present contract, McREL's energies had been moving toward this focus, as stated in their proposal summary for this competition in 1995.

Over the past five years, McREL has been increasing its focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment and school change processes in an effort to create a capacity for implementing suitable change in the classrooms, schools, and districts across the Central Region and through the Laboratory Network Program (LNP) across the United States.

Over the last two years (1993-95) the Laboratory has gradually shifted its emphasis to create a more balanced and interrelated program of field services and R & D based field efforts. Thus, McREL is well positioned and ready to immediately implement a comprehensive plan of work that incorporates the OERI priorities of systemic school reform and scaling up as outlined in the RFP.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what they were approved to do during their first three contract years?

1. Strengths

McREL has met its contractual obligations over the past three years as presented in the contract, modifications and annual updates. Justification has been provided to OERI in regard to certain year three products that are not completed at this time; the schedule for these has been updated.

Additional work is on-going at McREL, supported by other sources of revenue that compliments the REL work or is related to it. McREL excels, in my opinion, in using other internal resources, particularly staff and technology, to positively impact the work carried out

under the REL contract. This may be the most critical “infrastructure” at McREL. It enables more work to be accomplished in a more efficient manner. More importantly, it enables McREL as an organization to be highly responsive to educators and other citizens in the seven states, at all levels of service. In short, McREL leverages funds and other resources to the benefit of all users in its region. The matrix staff arrangement is exemplified by McREL’s Field Services initiative and is briefly discussed in question IV. A and B: Utility.

I reviewed 25 documents that illustrate components of “Implementation and Management.” Information from this material combined with the on-site visit contribute to the response to this question in the following categories: governance, management systems, planning, McREL in-house staff development and strategic alliances. These categories are not discussed separately in each case, or in depth. Rather, throughout this report, elements of my understanding as a peer reviewer are offered as highlights. From my perspective, it is not possible to become deeply knowledgeable about a complex organization in a short period of time. Therefore this report, based on my experience and interests, is to some extent impressionistic.

As I leave McREL, my strongest impression is that the staff is knowledgeable about its work, dedicated and responsive to those served, collaborative within the organization and with “clients” and productive in the areas of, for example, product development, dissemination and service delivery. I found this to be the case with leadership and management staff and with all staff who took part in the site visit. To move beyond the class of “grandiose claims”, these characteristics were reinforced and described to the review panel by state, local, and intermediate unit regional participants and members of the Board of Directors. The McREL staff is hard working and is a community of learners.

In-house Staff Development

I found McREL's approach to professional development rich, systematic, and an excellent example of "practicing what one preaches." In-house support has been thoughtfully developed and is a metaphor for how staff intend to work with educators.

Although skill building activities are covered, for example, improving competence with computer software, the core of the program matches with the organization's desire to become a community of learners as well as "teachers." The several aspects of the program build capacity for the organization, for individual staff and for those they serve. To cite examples that I read about or observed that strike me as positive: (1) the in-house Professional Development Committee appears organized and forward thinking in terms of topical categories offered, after collaborative planning; (2) individual needs are attended to (conferences, meetings external to McREL); (3) in-house study groups operate; (4) all-staff and across program area meetings are held on a standing basis as is the annual staff retreat.

I find the "streamlined" documentation of the several ways that staff can learn about each other's areas of interest and expertise innovative: listing of each staff member's areas of interest, of expertise, of publications they receive. I am not familiar with the specific documentation staff undertake after attendance at an external conference, meeting or other event, but I understand that such documentation happens, for the purpose of sharing information and knowledge with other staff members. These are only examples of ways of working that increase awareness among colleagues of their work and interests that can lead to informal as well as formal connections. While on site, I visited the Resource Room. It is well organized, well used by staff and supports staff development in-house. Material is also lent to clients.

Board of Directors

Peer reviewers had discussion by phone with five members of the Board of Directors. They are informed and engaged in shaping McREL's work, including its management and corporate arrangements. For example, they wanted McREL to increase their emphases on the use of client feedback during this contract period. It is clear that this has occurred and that gathering and using feedback happens across McREL's programs, product development and use, and events. In regard to McREL's corporate arrangements, Board members were interested in improving the relationship among the three corporate initiatives so that they would work together more effectively. They state that this improvement has occurred and Board members talk about the commonalities presently among the three entities. They have a common purpose, the same mission and goals, and "tons of operational clarity." (Board member) Board members and McREL administrators regard this as an on-going discussion and this type of interaction indicates a high level of collaboration and respect from both Board members and McREL executive leadership. Although some Board members may want to "do more direction setting", my understanding from them is that five or six years ago the planning process was more staff driven and that presently the Board is meaningfully involved in setting McREL's direction.

The Board strongly supports McREL's "Standards and Measurement work" that leverages what has been learned from collaboration with each of the seven states and assists states to integrate state and local Standards, Benchmarks and Assessment initiatives.

Strategic Alliances

The success of McREL's work in the region and nation is dependent on the establishment and maintenance of strategic alliances and partnerships. The Lab engages and interacts with a wide array of "relevant parties", and individuals as well as organizations. This is exemplified by relationships with SDE and LEA staff in the region, including classroom teachers, other educational agencies and organizations.

Based on the documents reviewed, on staff presentations and in discussion on-site (by phone), for example, with Board members, teachers, LEA superintendents and other administrators, intermediate unit staff and higher education representatives, interaction with individuals and organizations is high and successful.

McREL staff is described as collaborative, as learners and teachers/planners, as good listeners, as highly responsive to state and local needs, as talented and collegial. The ability to solicit and attend to user feedback was mentioned several times. Because these alliances undergird all work at McREL, these statements hardly do this topic justice. They are further discussed in IV. B in regard to regional Field Services and in V. C in regard to the Lab's Specialty Area.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Board of Directors

Although my understanding of the make-up of the Board of Directors is limited, it appears that attention to the issue of diversity might be revisited, with special attention to the three constituencies cited for consideration during this contract period: "research and development; K-12 and post secondary education practitioners; culturally diverse populations." (McREL)

I believe that two classroom teachers and one researcher may have been added to the Board since 1996, and I do not have information about the representation afforded the Board by “culturally diverse populations.” Board members estimate that attendance at Board meetings is 60-65 percent. Consideration might be given to determine ways to increase attendance. Board members state that strategic planning occurs periodically with one day planning sessions every two to three years. McREL Board and staff might consider establishing a Strategic Planning Committee, annual strategic planning sessions of at least one day, and methods for using a strategic plan that includes improved “tracking” of Lab plans and activities.

Deliverables

The Department of Education’s “Contractor Performance Information” document reports, “McREL continues to experience problems with the schedule of deliverables but has adjusted the work plan to ensure that deliverables are on schedule in the upcoming year.” Additional comments about the timeliness of deliverables are included in this brief report, with the acknowledgement that when the deliverables schedule was adjusted “work was then generally completed on time.” This does not seem to be a major problem and McREL is addressing this issue, which in part depends on having sufficient staffing to carry out the required work. McREL has an excellent reputation with the OERI contract and program offices in regard to management of the Lab and needs to ameliorate this “timeliness” issue.

Strategic alliances

It is presumptuous of me to speak to areas of needed improvement based on an incomplete understanding. However, it may benefit McREL to consider whether certain alliances might be strengthened. Although some documents reviewed describe the use of “experts” and Advisory Groups, except for the Quality Assurance process for products, the use

of external advisors was not emphasized during the site visit. In addition, the scope of IHE alliances might be increased.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

1. Strengths

Three categories are briefly discussed in this response: the Quality Assurance System; evaluation (self-assessment); and needs sensing.

Quality Assurance (QA)

McREL has a standardized system in place and in use to assure quality of products, including, for example, trainer's manuals, participant's manuals and videos. It appears that the formal Quality Assurance process is limited to the development of products and deliverables at this time.

Based on the results of a 1997 Summer staff meeting, where staff perceptions of the QA system were discussed, and improvements suggested, the process was revised in the fourth quarter, 1997. Suggestions for improving the system included:

- (a) increasing staff knowledge and understanding about QA
- (b) matching reviewers expertise with the products
- (c) clarifying time lines, review criteria, and procedures for responding to reviewers' comments
- (d) distinguishing QA from product development
- (e) identifying incentives for participating in QA

As a result of this discussion, the McREL Quality Assurance Plan was revised during the fourth quarter of FY 1997. (McREL)

Evaluation: Self-Assessment

Although not a requirement of the OERI contract, McREL has developed an annual "Evaluation Report" that is an important and useful self-assessment. Information gathered, and

resulting recommendations about all aspects of the Lab's operations and management, shape the many dimensions of work at McREL. Developing this document annually is an ambitious undertaking, but may be the Lab's most critical "tool" for planning, reflection and potential improvement. It is quite comprehensive, straight-forward, well formatted, and "accessible."

Other examples of internal oversight and evaluation include: (1) standing meetings of program staff, of management staff, of program-management staff, (2) program strands' consideration of client feedback from training events and conferences to improve products and services, (3) Quarterly Reports, (4) annual staff retreats for planning purposes, (5) activity logs kept by staff, shared with other staff and recorded as a data base, and (6) Board of Directors' meetings.

Needs Sensing

Needs sensing is also a mechanism for monitoring work at McREL. "Customer satisfaction" instruments are used extensively, for example, tied to training events and conferences, on site work in states, product use. There are regular and frequent meetings "in the field" with CSSO's, LEAs, IUs and other stakeholders in the states served.

More formal methods McREL uses to assess needs include: (1) a Gallup Poll commissioned telephone survey for 800 citizens in the region; (2) surveys conducted through their newsletter; (3) an electronically networked focus group of McREL staff; and (4) the tracking of Resource Center requests.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

It might be useful to review and consider improvement of the methods used for self-assessment, for example: might the sampling representativeness and the response rate be improved?

There is a broad array of formal and informal self-monitoring activity occurring throughout this contract period. Perhaps relationships can be drawn between the two processes.

III. Quality

A. To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

McREL is known regionally, nationally and internationally for its work in Standards-based education, benchmarks and assessment synthesis, development and dissemination through literature, products, and services. Individual users, state agencies, local school districts and professional organizations see this body of work as high quality work. Two examples of widely disseminated products are “Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education, 2nd Edition” and the policy brief published and distributed by the National Association of State Boards of Education, “The Fall and Rise of Standards-Based Education.” Both publications were developed by John Kendall and Robert Marzano. With other McREL staff, they have also prepared bibliographies and reviews of relevant literature as a foundation for developing products and services.

The work with Standards is used here to illustrate several aspects of “Quality” products and services offered by McREL because the work is highly visible, “in demand”, and already well developed. This area of concentration is also important because it is integrated into each of McREL’s OERI tasks, for example, it brings a clearly defined focus to the across-Laboratory work of McREL’s Specialty Area: Curriculum, Learning and Instruction.

In addition to conducting a comprehensive, broad-based review of the existing literature the “Standards work” has the following examples of “Quality”:

1. The work minimizes duplication with other efforts.
2. The Lab's products and services in this area build on one another. They are interrelated.
3. Products and services are consistent with McREL's stated mission.
4. McREL has demonstrated an on-going commitment to this area of work.
5. Staff make invited addresses at regional, national and international conferences.
6. Staff are asked to provide expert consultation in the region and nationwide.

In regard to "Quality" issues in other areas of McREL's service efforts, clients in the states served, at all levels, reported satisfaction with McREL staff responsiveness in regard to "customization of services", for example, in planning and in training development and delivery. Several participants in the on-site phone discussions noted that services are often adapted to meet their unique needs.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

1. Although there are several examples of the use of external peer review across initiatives, McREL might consider increasing the use of peer reviewers, particularly in the area of service delivery.
2. A need to focus on student outcomes and/or teacher behavior was put forth by members of the Board of Directors and clients in on-site phone discussions, including during the field testing stage.
3. McREL should consider whether or not the "Gallup Report" ("What Americans Believe Students Should Know: A Survey of U.S. Adults") serves educators and the public well. It could be checked for over-generalization or over-assertion about some of the data collected. My personal opinion is that it seems to be a publication more political than educational in nature. If it is flawed in methodology and/or the report-out, careful consideration should be given to whether repeating the survey and subsequent publication is in McREL's and the public's best interest. This is particularly important because of the influence of this type of publication.
4. During on-site discussion with McREL, some thought was given to the possibility of increasing connections between site service and research. This might be further explored.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

“Local, state, regional and out-side-of -the-region clients indicate a high regard for McREL products and services.” This is a consensus statement from the peer review panel as it met to discuss the on-site experience. The statement connotes a high regard for both the content and the “delivery process”, particularly for services: McREL is responding to the urgent needs of its “customers” in its Standards driven reform work. Products and services are valued.

Because McREL has been “ahead of the wave” in its work with Standards, the Lab has been able to assist state agencies, school districts and others with much needed “practical”, high quality assistance in a timely manner.

In our phone conversations with McREL clients from state education agencies, intermediate education agencies, school districts and schools it was clear that these clients are in agreement with McREL staff about the nature of McREL’s services. It was also clear that these users respect and appreciate McREL’s Standards Documents and the assistance that “rolls out” from them, as well as McREL’s other Standards related professional development services.

As we discussed these products and services by phone, I “checked off” offerings provided to the review panel by McREL staff that were described by the clients.

- provide training to Standards writing committees in the articulation of standards
- provide feedback on existing Standards documents
- correlate state and/or district Standards documents with national, state and/or district assessments

- provide executive summaries of external assessment studies and reviews
- customize models for constructing classroom activities and units that lead to performance assessment and the application of knowledge
- lead classroom teachers in constructing, implementing, and revising classroom activities, units, and performance tasks that are keyed to district and/or state Standards
- create models of effective classroom activities and performance tasks keyed to Standards as requested by the district and/or state
- create customized staff development and study group models that support the implementation

Two broad and different components come to mind to indicate successful work.

1. McREL's products, and in some cases, services, are available in a variety of modes: CD-ROM, audio, video, print, Website, in person. "Users" have the option of selecting a mode that fits their interest or need. The recent report of information requests to the Resource Center received through email, phone, fax, and mail indicates that most inquiries are about products and that information about professional development and assessment is requested most frequently.

McREL's website has been renovated; it is attractive, user friendly and well used. It shows high and increasing usage with hits presently at 3,000 per day. McREL is appropriately proud of the extensive use of their Website.

2. The second component, Regional Field Services, is at the heart of McREL's interaction with educators in their region. This established system features ongoing interaction with users that facilitates open and frequent communication. This Signature Work is discussed further in the "Utility" question that follows, IV. B.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

With a wide array of possibilities tied to the use of Standards in different settings, it was difficult for me to understand levels of implementation across states and sites, or schedules for implementation. To a large extent, this may be due to customizing the process to a state or site.

Such customization was well appreciated by the users we talked with, but in a sense it made planning and scheduling over time quite tentative. Suggested improvements might include:

- encourage planning and scheduling by states and sites to encompass for the next two years
- increase the number of McREL staff that directly serve Standards planning, professional development and support to states and sites during implementation

McREL should continue to expand products and services to engage broader client groups, for example, more parents, more community members, more non-English speakers. The Lab should continue to explore ways to ensure that products and services are appropriate for users from different cultural and economic backgrounds and perspectives. McREL may decide that all products and services are not appropriate for all clients.

Perhaps McREL could establish an in-house Study Group to consider, for example, what might be an appropriate balance between a focus on Standards in a student's day and week and other important elements of schooling. What might "too much" focus on Standards exclude from a student's educational experience? What might be "too much"?

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

From the development of the proposal for this five year period through year three, McREL has understood the importance of attending to the needs of the region. McREL also appears to be sensitive to the needs of OERI. From formal needs sensing (Gallup, QED) the expressed needs "encompass virtually every aspect of the educational system." (proposal)

Information has been collected and analyzed using a range of formal and informal processes. Needs sensing activities have involved SEA staff, superintendents, local

administrative and technical support, communities, businesses, parent groups in the region and in the nation.

Feedback has been garnered from a staff, an electronically networked focus group, a mail-in survey (McREL newsletter), tracking information requests (Resource Center, Website), and regional conferences. For each survey, the responses were many and varied (curriculum and subject content; length of school weeks and school year; fighting; violence; lack of financial support, hiring, practical, and so on). Although no policy or social or curriculum item is especially prominent in these surveys, two or three topics are mentioned most frequently: (1) violence/discipline/conflict resolution, (2) parent involvement, and youth at risk, especially language minorities. I know little about these surveys, for example, number of respondents or roles of respondents. My point here is, in terms of McREL's strengths and the directions they and OERI (RFP) wished to head for this contract duration, focused interviews carried out with each of the seven CSSOs from 1995 to the present time identify needs for assistance from McREL quite clearly, because of the nature of the interviews. The discussion was centered on ways that McREL "could assist states in implementing successful systemic reform and in facilitating higher achievement of all students" (McREL). Findings from the first round of interviews with CSSOs clustered around "issues of systemic reform, Standards, curriculum and assessment, and issues regarding student diversity." These have continued as the key issues for the past three years.

In fact, between organizational internal reflection, at McREL, that includes staff and the Board of Directors, and state interviews/discussions, the Lab is doing business in several new ways, as proposed.

Three “new ways of doing business” are clearly in effect through the Regional Field Services efforts.

1. A change in the Lab’s infrastructure has evolved during this contract period and includes (a) State Facilitation Groups in each state (CSSO, researcher, field service state person, McREL Liaison) (b) Collaborative State Action teams (teachers, parents, policy makers, communities, Libraries, etc).
2. The Regional Field Services Team models McREL’s shift to a collaborative inquiry approach.
3. Internally, the Regional Field Services Staff appear to model the behaviors they believe and teach, are important to organizational success.

One of McREL’s (summarized) overall goals from the proposal for this five year contract is to: “Develop local, state and regional capacity to plan, implement and evaluate reform initiatives by serving as a facilitator, resource, trainer, convener and direct assistance provider.”

Regional Field Services illustrates this statement and also a focus on customer needs by incorporating the following.

- Customer needs are incorporated into the Lab’s planning process.
- The Board of Directors plays a role in ensuring that priorities are responsive to customer needs.
- Regional Field Service staff, including particularly staff of CSRD (Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program) are focused on the need for products and services culturally, economically and linguistically appropriate for educators and students in their region.
- The relationship of Field Services to states is iterative, and on-going. Feedback on the Lab overall and on specific products and services is regularly implemented.
- Field Service staff use feedback to refine later versions of services (conferences, professional development, technical assistance).

I use Regional Field Services to illustrate this and the next two questions because it was presented to us as one of two signature works, because it interacts with all Lab tasks and because both the materials and the staff presentations were clear and coherent.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Self reports on client satisfaction seem to be the primary means for assessing whether client needs are met, with a wide range of educators in the region.

Feedback from students at local sites, not necessarily achievement scores, would add to the picture of “customer needs”.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL’s work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

McREL’s concern about Standards seems to have at its heart concerns about student success, student achievement. Through its Standards work, the Lab addresses issues of national significance. Through its array of products and services to states, local districts, school and other entities the Lab has increased the level of understanding about Standards, Benchmarks, Assessments as well increased educators’ knowledge about “next steps”, strategies for implementation. Many materials of various types are available to educators and other citizens in various “formats”, for example, print, videotapes, Website. Staff has called attention to key issues, through, for example, conference presentations and an April 1999 Ed Week article. Standards efforts are woven throughout the reform work undertaken by McREL.

In discussion by phone with members from McREL’s region affiliated with the Regional Field Service Office group (SEA staff, State Facilitation Group, CSAT reps) the level of interest and action vis-à-vis the Standards is high. The level of respect and appreciation for the State

Liaisons and other McREL staff is also high. All state educators on their phone call acknowledged the flexibility, ability to customize services and collaboration of McREL's staff.

These brief descriptions are introduced here because much has been accomplished over the past three years. In many states and local sites opportunities are being built, in some cases are built, to make it possible to move ahead with the implementation and study of state, local district, and school based Standards reform.

Addressing issues of diversity in relation to Standards is an emerging initiative at McREL and is off to an ambitious, serious start. Clearly diversity issues cut across all Lab tasks and work groups. "In-house" collaboration to date, for example has been with the Regional Field Services team, staff of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program and staff working with other Labs and National Research Centers.

In October 1999, McREL hosted the first "Diversity Roundtable on Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student Populations" for 60 educators, primarily from LEAs. This awareness-raising, two day event used four commissioned research synthesis papers related to Standards reform, targeted to classroom teachers, as a catalyst for discussion. These papers will be published and used as a foundation for training events. Staff hope to plan and convene a second Roundtable targeted to administrators. I would hope that this work could be well supported and expand; it's well done. The following goals were used for the Roundtable event. They are included here because they also give a concise description of the larger area of work.

- Build participant capacity for working with these populations by enhancing their understanding of related research.
- Serve as a catalyst for critical examination and discussion of pertinent issues.
- Stress the need for improving the alignment of practice with Standards-based reform.

- Raise awareness of the need for procedures, policy, and practice to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

2. Areas of improvement and recommendation

Lab staff should reconsider how they might evaluate site based interventions, especially long-term interventions. What data will be useful for monitoring change? For monitoring student achievement over time? What baseline information is needed? How many sites should be evaluated “thoroughly”? Would extensive documentation be useful in addition to “making a case”? If so, for example, if such sites move on to be the catalysts for scaling up because they in turn will work with other schools, what intermediary indicators of the system, the site, teachers, students, “site assitors” etc might be needed?

The Lab might consider increasing evaluation beyond self-report of the impact on teachers and students of its products and services especially when events or assistance are small scale.

Consider establishing the Diversity Roundtable as an annual event and keeping planning time to five or six months.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

In response to prior questions, specific examples have elaborated many statements. A major comprehensive school improvement initiative, Standards-based reform, permeates all of McREL’s activities. The response in this instance puts forth statements that reflect the work of individuals, of work teams, of McREL as a whole.

1. Strengths

- McREL’s products and services are widely used. The Lab is recognized at the local, state and national levels as a leading expert on Standards and on comprehensive school reform.

- The Lab distills findings from research-based literature and makes them available and useful.
- Lab staff assist states, school districts and schools review and select models and strategies that meet their interests and needs. Lab staff are appropriately flexible in adopting different strategies to meet clients' varying needs. Their clients respect and appreciate the ability of the Lab staff to customize strategies to meet state and local needs.
- Lab staff provide technical assistance by various means: for example, electronically, on site, by phone, through conferences and forums. During this contract period, it appears that work in the stages of review and selection, staff development and planning have been dominant.
- The Lab's website includes useful (and used) information about comprehensive school improvement strategies.
- The Lab makes some referrals within the region to facilitate transfer of knowledge about comprehensive school improvement.
- McREL has developed strategic alliances that assist the Lab to accomplish the objectives of their work.
- Lab staff work hard and intelligently "to model the behaviors they believe (and teach) are important to organizational success: involving people in decisions, making clear assignments, supporting people in learning, relearning and acquiring the skills they need to accomplish their work, and holding them accountable for results." This approach applies to staff work within McREL and external work. Staff want to build the capacity of the Lab and of their partners.
- McREL influences policy, primarily through its strategic alliances and through partnership forums. The Lab provides data to inform policy decisions.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Given its regional and national prominence, it is important that McREL ensure that its products and services are solidly research based. It would damage the Lab's reputation, the credibility of the Standards "movement," and the reputation and credibility of current educational reform if products and services are not "reality based" or if claims are "exaggerated".

The ideas in this paragraph are more personal and speculative than empirical. I am from a state outside of McREL's region where the legislature a week ago "seriously wounded" the Standards-based Profile of Learning. By the end of the next legislative session in 2000, the Profile will be improved and generally accepted by educators and the public-at-large, or eliminated. The debate came down in this state to a number of issues often raised in regard to the use of Standards: "any real remedy would involve a change in the fundamental equation of teachers, students, curriculum and time. More teachers or less curriculum. More time or fewer mandates. This discussion is not taking place." (guest editorial: The Review)

In fact, this discussion is taking place here and in other states. It is frequently not taking place in a productive way and it may be too late for a turn-around in this state. Momentum around the Standards movement can dissipate quickly.

My suggestion is that McREL go beyond the identification of difficult issues such as "time" and increase its participation in the discussion. The McREL staff is highly talented and can bring their many "hats" to bear as: philosopher, academic, pragmatist, convener, researcher and service provider, politician and entrepreneur. This critical task needs a forum and it needs collaboration between McREL and a wide group of stakeholders, in their region and nationwide.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

McREL's specialty area under this contract is Curriculum, Learning and Instruction (CLI). The Lab, in collaboration with the other nine RELs, is investigating Standards-based education reform nationwide. It is significant and exemplary that the 10 RELs are working

together to study the issues of this reform in all 50 states; goals and objectives of the project were collaboratively constructed.

The “controlling document” for this project (LNP-CLI) is often revisited and modified by the LNP group, based on new information. I reviewed versions three and eight. Lab executive staff with major responsibility for this specialty area project, also presented to the peer review panel.

McREL has a national and international reputation in the area of Standards as they apply to curriculum, learning, and instruction. In addition to a high level of collaboration with the other Labs, at this point in the contract several strengths stand out.

- The goals and objectives outlined in the LNP-CLI for years one through three have been accomplished.
- Information collected in Phase I has been summarized and distributed nationally as an “issue brief”. These “lessons learned” from Phase I are also highlighted on the McREL webpage with links to it from other Laboratories.
- The audience grows in breadth with each phase of the project: over 2,500 “issue briefs” are being disseminated nationwide.
- Products that resulted from the project’s first phase, “Taking Stock of States’ Curriculum-based Reform Efforts” is also being disseminated nationwide.

The LNP-CLI has undertaken an ambitious effort and it’s “on schedule”. The team is studying education reform as it is being designed and implemented at state, district and school levels.

2. Improvements/Recommendations

Because of McREL’s national stature in Standards-based reform and because the project engages all RELs, and OERI, it will be crucial that products and services that result from this project are solidly research based. As I participate in “my” state with taking the public’s pulse, a

“warts and all” approach would be preferable and more positive politically than a public relations approach which could easily backfire.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

McREL is a successful Regional Educational Laboratory and is meeting its OERI contractual obligations. Its long-term work in Curriculum, Learning, and Instruction has evolved into a focus on Standards-based educational reform. McREL’s concentrated and quite comprehensive effort in this area is acknowledged and respected by educators nationwide. Work on Standards is infused throughout the Lab’s contractual Tasks, including the “Specialty Area” Task.

Staff bring to all Tasks a “corporate culture” of service, of response to others’ needs and the ability to work well with clients from many levels in education. Staff talent to lead and support simultaneously was pointed out several times during the site visit.

McREL is fortunate to have a Board of Directors that cares about the Lab and wants to continue to assist McREL with its present and future initiatives and direction-setting.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

McREL has many strengths; those mentioned here are strengths that come immediately to mind. This Lab has a staff with many talents that works hard to interact collaboratively with states, school districts, schools and other organizations in its region. Much of this work addresses Standards-based educational reform, a signature work for this site review. The second signature work, Regional Field Services, has developed a field based system that serves the

seven states in its region through a planning and delivery process and a perspective on service to these states that is responsible and responsive. McREL is well managed and has been able to extend its OERI scope of work by leveraging financial and human resources from other sources.

Certain areas might be considered for improvement.

- McREL can capitalize on the Board of Directors' interest in direction-setting by developing an annual strategic plan with them.
- McREL has lost staff over the past two years that includes leadership positions in the area of organizational development. The Lab has a challenge to “staff up” that must be addressed and solved in order for the Lab to move ahead as quickly as possible. As the Standards work increases the number of sites across the states implementing the use of Standards, expertise in organizational development should contribute to the success of these sites.
- Increasing the diversity of Lab staff and of the Board of Directors is a concern.
- Research and evaluation of the stages of the use of Standards needs attention. People (teachers, administrators, parents, students) and organizations (state departments of education, school districts, schools, classrooms) should be considered as possible partners in this effort.